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FATIGUE WITH THE WORLD, OR THE POLITICAL POWER OF EXHAUSTION

PHILOFICTION BLOOM, DELEUZE, EXHAUSTION, FATIGUE, ZIQQUN

Andrés Abril – *Lobo suelto!* (17/10/2019)

Things among things, the Bloom holds itself outside of everything in a forsaking identical to that of our universe. It is alone in all company and naked at all events. It is there that it reposes, in the extenuated ignorance of self, of its desires and of the world, where life runs over the rosary of its absence. All the living contents exchange themselves indifferently in it, at the mercy of a sort of existential tourism. We forgot joy as we forgot suffering, we became illiterate of the sphere of emotions, we perceive them only as diffracted echoes. Everything is worn out to our backwards eyes, even misfortune. And perhaps in the end the disaster resides here: finding no one in support of either doubt or certitude. ... There is something calmly suicidal in the affirmation of a non-participation, of so unilateral an indifference and refusal to suffer.

Tiqqun, *The Theory of Bloom*

There is a kind of fatigue in the contemporary world, an affective tonality that crosses the various spheres of human life. In offices and factories, stress and the vertiginous atmosphere of work deplete our good willingness; in large cities, traffic exhausts even the most patient of drivers or users of public transport; inefficient bureaucracy, concrete realization of the worst Kafkaesque nightmares, leaves us without energy at the end of the day; in schools and universities, where teachers no longer only carry out educational work but also administrative and interpersonal management work, the workload becomes unmanageable; freelancers, true "free spears", mercenaries of neo-liberalism, must exhaust all the possibilities they have at hand and, in that way, exhaust themselves to keep up with expenses; in the political register there is disenchantment, hopelessness, perhaps despair, and we feel tired now, longing for a change that does not come, because all the alternatives seem to have been exhausted; even in love there is tiredness and boredom: in the face of the threat of monotony and the need for constant change, in the face of the vertiginous imperative of "doing what we want" (essential slogan of capitalist propaganda), it is enough to *swipe left* to save us of the heavy burden of the other. We are tired, weary, exhausted. We have no time, time is running out. In turn, time, that delusional time of capital, depletes us.

It is not surprising, then, that both the discourses of hyper-productivity and those of the hyper-valuation of rest are exacerbated

in the context of contemporary capitalism. It is symptomatic that we find, for example, energetic propaganda slogans that exhort us to strive, to go beyond, to give everything of ourselves and to be proactive entrepreneurs of our lives, of our own souls: go beyond yourself, your body, your tiredness! At the same time, the leisure and pleasure industries make it possible to rest, to get away from daily stress, a spectacular product. Whether in a heavenly place or in our homes, rest becomes something valuable, a fundamental commodity that must be acquired to fully enjoy life. Give everything of yourself and then rest! ... So that you can again give everything of yourself. Hyper-productivity and leisure, in that sense, are part of the same logic, of the same smooth space of capital in which the constant fatigue-rest cycle is nothing more than an eternal fatigue, an eternal exhaustion. *Tire yourself out so that I will help you.*

If fatigue is revealed as an affective tonality characteristic of our time, and if the exhausted subject seems to be so consubstantial with contemporary ways of life, it is relevant to think about the issue of fatigue and exhaustion in light of the articulation between affects and politics. As a result or product of certain emotional charges and encounters, fatigue not only reflects the current condition of post-fordist societies, but also allows us to assess the powers that the same can unleash. In other words, fatigue, beyond being a mere sociological or psycho-physiological phenomenon, becomes a field of possibilities for thinking about politics. The affects, as we well know, have an ambiguous or paradoxical character. Therefore, taking tiredness (or exhaustion) seriously not only implies taking into account what blocks or interrupts; it is also necessary to look at what could prompt forward or originate: a fatigue that produces things, a *productive fatigue*.

With this in mind, in the first part of this essay, we will make a brief presentation of the conditions in which fatigue originates. Here, Mark Fisher's reading of depression (2016) and Gilles Deleuze's (1996) characterisation of societies of control will help us to delineate this scenario. In a second moment, and in order to dislocate the concepts of the discussion, we will explore the Deleuzian distinction between fatigue and exhaustion. This will allow us to think about such issues in a political key, but, above all, productive key, that is, as aspects that open horizons and possibilities of thought and action. Finally, in the last section, we will explore the relationship between exhaustion and creation, or, if you like, the creative and political power of exhaustion.

I

In "Postscript on societies of control", a well-known text published in French in 1990, Deleuze gives an account of the changes in the dynamics of power and social organisation that had already been gestating for a few years with the rise of neo-liberalism (dynamics that Foucault himself analysed in some of his texts and classes). For Deleuze (1996), the old disciplinary societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which had replaced sovereign societies, were being replaced, in turn, by a new type of social formation: the society of control. Unlike the disciplinary ones, Deleuze tells us, control societies no longer have independent confinement centers. That is, the individual no longer moves throughout her/his life between one institution and another: from the family to the school, from the school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory, etc. "[I]n the societies of control one is never finished with anything – the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation." (Deleuze, 1996, p. 280) Thus, even in the course of a day, an individual does not cease to be in the company even if he is with her/his family, or continues to be her/his own "doctor at home" (someone who regulates her/his well-being) even when s/he is not in a health center.

This smooth space of societies of control, as opposed to the striated and segmented space of disciplinary societies, gives way to the blurring of the boundaries between one social regime and another, and, to that extent, flattens out the ground where codes and affects flow: men become the managers of their homes, the boss encourages his employees to establish a large family, the woman takes care of and manages her body and soul as if it were a company, etc. However, by becoming a market economy, and despite the multiple overlaps between one dimension and another, in societies of control business and financial logic end up permeating the language, the relationships and ways of life of subjects. Of particular importance, then, is the elimination of the border between business and home, between the sphere of production and reproduction, between work and leisure. The subject is a company, is an entrepreneur of her/himself, and at the same time carries the company (work) with her/him: no matter where s/he is, s/he is always working.

If there is no outside to work, to the company, then there is no such thing as work and leisure, fatigue and rest; there is just a single plane space of productive activity. Work has become "personal", and the "personal" is already a job. In that sense, the suppression of a more or less delimited work space, coupled with the development of new technologies, has decisively altered the way in which we relate to our own body and that of others. Which means, in the end, that the insertion of work in the "personal" sphere constitutes not simply a modification in economic logic, or even a transformation in the order of the symbolic; it's about "something more." It is, to put it pointedly, an affective transformation, if we understand, together with Spinoza, that the affects are "modifications of the body, whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished, aided or constrained, and also the ideas of such modifications." (Ethics, III, d3)

From the perspective of emotions or affects, the new dynamic of work permeates the type of relationships our body has with everything that surrounds it. The excess of technological devices and tools, as well as the excessive workload or lack of work stability, alter the way we desire, the way we affect and are affected. We are impelled by external forces, we experience things in different ways, and the affects which circulate increase or decrease our power to act. Thus, we are not subject to a specific schedule, but in return we owe our soul to constant work; we pretend not to have bosses, but we are forced to regulate our

activities and produce results; we do not get tired after working eight hours, but we are absorbed by continuous fatigue, by an endless cycle of small and almost imperceptible tiredness and rest. And if before the fatigue was felt after a long working day, now it is constant, it is always there, because there is no longer a working day or space. Fisher (2016) is blunt in his lucid description of this situation:

One of the consequences of modern communication technologies is that they do not have an external space in which one can rest from them and recover. Cyberspace makes the classic concept of "work-space" obsolete. In a world where we are expected to respond to a work email almost any time of day, work is no longer limited to a place or time. There is no escape, and not only because the work expands without limits. These processes began to sneak into the libido so that the strangulation caused by the excess of telecommunications is not necessarily experienced as something unpleasant. (pp. 133-134)

In this passage, Fisher makes a fundamental point. The dynamics of work in contemporary capitalism have achieved that fatigue is exacerbated to unsuspected limits, even having what is exhausting or unpleasant not be conceived as such. To that extent, as part of a new sensorium, fatigue arises as the preeminent affective tonality in contemporary capitalism. From this, particular dispositions and interactions are configured, as well as mutable and mutant social relationships and formations. For example, with "families buckling under the pressure of a capitalism which requires both parents to work, teachers are now increasingly required to act as surrogate parents, instilling the most basic behavioral protocols in students and providing pastoral and emotional support for teenagers who are in some cases only minimally socialized." (Fisher, 2016, p. 55). We face, then, tiredness, fatigue, as an affective tonality, even as an affect of the contemporary world.

It seems, for all the above, that fatigue is the product of a weight, of a negative and crushing force. And this is not entirely false, since it is an extenuation, with an organic cost – or better, psycho-physiological – that defines certain limits of the body and that can significantly decrease its power to act. However, fatigue in itself is neither negative or positive, but productive, it does things. Thus, if we conceive fatigue as what the body registers in the form of affect because of the psycho-physiological expenditure to which it is subjected (Wasser, 2012), and if we accept that the affects have an inherently ambiguous and paradoxical character, then it is it is essential to consider not only what fatigue blocks or interrupts, but what it allows, drives forward or produces. In his diagnosis of what he calls capitalist realism, Fisher (2016) states that we now face "a more generalised and deeper sense of exhaustion and political sterility".⁽²⁹⁾ Therefore, taking this assertion seriously implies taking to the last consequences a reflection on tiredness and exhaustion. This undoubtedly constitutes a first order task to think of new ways to constitute the commons and to redefine the political in the contemporary world.

II

"L'épuisé"/"The Exhausted" (1992), one of the last texts published by Gilles Deleuze, is a fundamental pillar for the majority of explorations around the figures of tiredness and exhaustion. There, Deleuze establishes a distinction between the exhausted (*épuisé*) and the tired (*fatigué*): "The tired has only exhausted realization, while the exhausted exhausts all of the possible. The tired can no longer realize, but the exhausted can no longer possibilitate." (Deleuze, 1992, p. 57) [1]. While it is true that the text appears as a postface in the French edition of Quad (television piece written by Samuel Beckett in 1980), and as such does not explicitly constitute a reflection on the political, but an exploration of the sensitive, there are certain passages and moments that allow us to extract from it a political potential. In fact, Zourabichvili (1998) confirms this idea by stating that "L'épuisé" "is not a political essay, since it is dedicated to Beckett. But it appears less than three years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the discourses satisfied by the death of utopias proliferate, by the illusion of any alternative to the market economy; and its theme is the exhaustion of the possible." (p. 336) In that register, following Deleuze's distinction between the tired (or fatigued) and the exhausted will allow us, we believe, to throw some light on the relationship between the affective and the political.

The tired, as Deleuze characterises it, does not exhaust everything possible, it only realises it. That is, it combines a set of variables to realise the possible, because it works by the exclusion of possibilities. The "realisation of the possible always proceeds through exclusion, because it presupposes preferences and goals that vary, forever replacing predecessors. It is these variations, these substitutions, all these exclusive disjunctions (daytime/night-time, going out/staying in...) that are tiring in the end." (Deleuze, 1992, p. 58-59) In other words, "fatigue comes when we realise the possibles that inhabited us, choosing, obeying certain objectives and not others, carrying out certain projects, following clear preferences." (Pelbart, 2013, p. 38) We get tired, therefore, to the extent that we follow a predetermined path, in which the possible is presented as a predefined field that we are going to realise, and not as something that is engendered as it is realized. We could say, from this perspective, that fatigue is nothing other than the product of intensities that carry out a naked repetition, a repetition without difference (in the language of *Difference and Repetition*).

The contemporary subject gets tired of realising all the possibilities, but these are already prefigured: I go to school, I go to class, I leave to rest, I get tired, I go to class again, I leave school, I arrive at my house, I do homework, I get tired, I sleep, and again the next day I continue to realise possibilities without exhausting them; or I study, work, get married, get divorced, get married, work, retire, get tired ... The exhausted, for its part, exhausts all possible. "It exhausts exhausting the possible, and vice versa. It exhausts what is *not realised* in the possible. It is done with the possible, beyond all tiredness." (Deleuze, 1992, p. 57) It seeks to realise the impossible. The exhausted, in that sense, does not exclude, but includes disjunctively: "you combines a set of variables of a

situation, provided you renounce all order of preference and all organisation of goal, all signification." (Deleuze, 1992, p. 59) It is in such a way that, in exhaustion, when one contracts too much, when different combinations are carried out, a "satiety" springs up: "not a tendency to zero, but simultaneously a moment of stasis and a passage to a recursively transformative action".(Wasser, 2012, p. 132)

It is possible to glimpse, then, the political potential that arises when thinking of exhaustion. Unlike the tired, which realises what can become, the exhausted, having exhausted the possible, has no alternative but to create. "Exhaustion corresponds to an emptying of all of the possibles catalogued and incorporated into the repertoire. With such emptying, one has no where to hold on: neither a utopia, nor an ideology, nor an anchor. And before this impossibility, one has no choice. A possible must be invented."(Pelbart, 2009, p. 17) But who is this exhausted character who is forced to create, to invent? For Deleuze, for example, the exhausted par excellence would be the writer, the writer of fragile health who, crushed by the great force of life, exhausts the possible and creates. "It is very possible that a writer has a fragile health, a weak constitution, but s/he is nevertheless the opposite of a neurotic: someone who lives life with great intensity (in the manner of Spinoza, Nietzsche or Lawrence), although s/he is too weak for the life that goes through her/him or the affects that inhabit her/him."(Deleuze and Parnet, 2013, p. 59)

We find, however, another formidable figure to think about the potential of exhaustion in the contemporary world. It is a conceptual character that is present in some of the writings of the Tiquun collective and which is described in detail in a magnificent text entitled *The Theory of Bloom*. To begin with, "Bloom is primarily just a hypothesis, but it is a hypothesis that has become true: 'modernity' has realised it."(Tiquun, s.f., s.p.) It is, in this first instance, and in the terms of our discussion, the tired individual, the realisation of a kind of bourgeois ethics, the ultimate manifestation of capital. And if so, why is Bloom important? If it is a figure that embodies, or at least exposes the modern condition of man, what potential can it offer us? It is relevant because this facet of Bloom, Tiquun will tell us, was only the final phase of its constitution:

It took nothing less than the collapse, according to the concept, of the totality of bourgeois institutions and a first world war to give birth to it. It is, then, only with the advent of the Spectacle, and the effective entry into the corresponding mercantile metaphysics, that the inversion of the generic relationship takes on a concrete significance, extending to the whole of existence. Bloom then designates the continuation equally double movement by which, as the alienation of Advertising is perfected and that appearance becomes autonomous from every lived world, each woman/man sees the set of his social determinations, that is, his identity, becoming foreign and strange, including even when what exceeds all social objectification in it – its pure naked and irreducible singularity – takes off as the empty center from which all its being proceeds. ... The condition of exile in the unrepresentable that men and their common world are in coincides with the situation of existential clandestinity which befalls them in the Spectacle. That condition is a manifestation of the absolute singularity of each social atom as the absolutely anonymous, ordinary social atom, and its pure differentiation as pure nothingness.(s.p.)

In the manner of Musil's man without qualities, Bloom is the anybody, the absolute singularity that "exhausts the possible because it is in turn exhausted", and "is exhausted because it has exhausted the possible".(Deleuze, 1992, p. 57) Precisely because of its exhaustion, its extenuation, and, to that extent, because of its "anybodyness," Bloom constitutes a power of transformation, even creation. "Subject without subjectivity, person without personality, individual without individuality, Bloom explodes at its simple touch all of the old chimeras of traditional metaphysics, all of the paralysed hardware of the transcendental self and the synthetic unity of apperception. Everything that is said about this strange guest that inhabits us and that we are fatally, is reached in Being. There, everything vanishes."(Tiquun, s.f., s.p.) Thus, dispossessed of all of its own content, Bloom can be anything else, invent new possibilities to compose itself with the world, to configure it.

III

We finally arrive at a fundamental question. If, unlike fatigue, exhaustion exhausts all of the possible, what is its contemporary relevance, and more specifically, its political potential-power? Dispossessed, exhausted, extenuated, stripped of all identity, what limits or horizons, or thresholds perhaps, allow us to explore the Bloom/exhausted? Exhaustion, understood as an affect or an affective tonality, indicates the finitude of the living present, of the body and the organism. Subjected to the contraction of instants or to the exhaustion of what is possible, what exhausts and the body of the exhausted point to the threshold of forces that a being is able to support before it changes state.(Wasser, 2012) The exhaustion in the current situation becomes, in that measure, an extremely relevant aspect to think and create new possibilities, to "change state".

Now, between the "we are tired" (tiredness) that capitalism forces us to wield and the "we are tired!" (exhaustion) as a cry for actualising the virtual, as experimentation, there is a big difference. As Pelbart (2013) points out, "fatigue is part of the dialectic of work and production: one rests to resume activity. ... Now, exhaustion is completely different The exhausted is one who, having exhausted her/his object, exhausts her/himself, so that this dissolution of the subject corresponds to the abolition of the world."(p. 39) It is necessary, then, that exhaustion as an affective tonality allows us to detach ourselves from what binds us, what immobilises us, and that from the asphyxiation and exhaustion imposed by the market and capital, the potential-power to create new possibilities arises. Tiredness has led us to abandon any possibility of transformation, because apparently there is nothing left to imagine. As the famous phrase that went viral in the mouth of Žižek says, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. But it is not a matter of fatigue, of resigning ourselves to the impossibility of carrying out a possible foreshadowing, but of exhaustion, of realizing the impossible. "It is no longer about the possible that gives rise to the event, but

about the event that creates a possible — just as the crisis was not the result of a process, but the event from which a process could be triggered” (Pelbart, 2013, p. 45).

With exhaustion as a critical moment, what we know goes to the bottom, it goes down. And when this happens, the ground erupts. Therefore, when we are exhausted, it is possible to detach ourselves from the world, to free ourselves from what holds us to it and others, to detach ourselves from “what ‘comforts us’ within the illusion of fortitude (of self, of we, of the sense, of freedom, of the future).”(Pelbart, 2013, p. 46). The Bloom, the subject without subjectivity of the contemporary world, the anyone who has exhausted the possibilities, opens doors, or rather, produces a threshold from which new life forms could be created. The danger, however, underlies the very affective nature of exhaustion. As such, exhaustion can be productive and provide the impetus to create or, on the contrary, block creative and inventive energies. There, precisely, is the quid; there, in the care for what is possible and in the intrinsic ambiguity of the affects, the wager must be made. Even so, “the conclusion is clear: it is exhausting the possible that we create it. It is necessary to get to ‘breathing without oxygen’, in favour of a ‘more elementary energy and rarefied air’.”(Pelbart, 2013, p. 46)

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[1] The pages cited from “L'épuisé” refer to the original French text. However, here we have made use of a translation by Raúl Sánchez Cedillo (with eventual modifications), which is available online at ... <http://imperceptibledeleuze.blogspot.com/2016/05/el-agotado.html> [An English version of the essay is available here].

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